The Concept of Beauty in Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*

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There are several reasons for making Baumgarten's treatment of beauty the focus of this paper. First, the term in one form or another appears frequently throughout the *Aesthetica,* beginning with the opening paragraph. Second, the way it is referred to is likely to strike the present-day reader as a little odd: Baumgarten speaks not so much of beauty *per se*, but of the *art of thinking beautifully*, a puzzling notion to say the least. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the question of the *Aesthetica*'s philosophical value which hinges as much on Baumgarten's treatment of beauty as on any other consideration.

My aim in what follows is first of all, as the title of the paper suggests, to say something about the place of beauty in Baumgarten's aesthetic schema. I'll be grounding this discussion on the work I've completed so far towards a translation of Baumgarten's text, supplemented where appropriate by reference to his earlier work on poetry and poetics. I hope then to be in a position to make some sort of judgement as to whether the time and effort involved in translating Baumgarten's decidedly idiosyncratic Latin can be philosophically justified.

Baumgarten's status as a philosopher is less than fully assured. If he has been heard of at all today it's for having established aesthetics as a discrete branch of philosophical enquiry and for giving it the name by which it is still known. No small achievement, it would seem, yet its apparent significance has not been reflected in the subsequent reception of Baumgarten's work. Until the publication of Dagmar Mirbach's parallel Latin-German edition in 2007, no complete translation of the *Aesthetica* into a modern language existed.[1] There have been partial translations into French and Portuguese, but apart from short quoted passages in the not very extensive scholarly literature devoted to the *Aesthetica*, nothing at all in English.[2]

No single explanation accounts for this neglect, though a combination of several factors seems likely to have contributed to the scant attention paid until recently not only to the *Aesthetica* but to the rest of Baumgarten's *oeuvre*. I'll list them briefly.

First, a much shorter and more accessible presentation of Baumgarten's theory of sensory cognition in relation to poetic language can be found in his doctoral thesis, published in Halle in 1735 and in an English translation titled *Reflections on Poetry* by the University of California Press in 1954.[3] It is here that the term *aesthetic* is first introduced, albeit only in passing towards the end of the dissertation. Some would contend that the *Reflections* contains all the essential elements of Baumgarten's program, with the unfinished *Aesthetica*, as Frederic Beiser puts it, simply 'realising' it and refining its 'formulation'.[4]

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[1] See Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Ästhetik*, 2 vols, trans. Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007).

[2] See Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Esthétique*, trans. Jean-Yves Pranchère (Paris: L'Herne, 1988); also, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Estética: A lógica da arte e do poema*, trans. Miriam Sutter Medeiros (Petrópolis, Brazil: Editora Vozes, 1993).

[3] See *Reflections on Poetry: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, translated with the original text, an introduction and notes by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

[4] Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 123.

Second, as Baumgarten himself notes in the preface to the *Aesthetica*, the further elaboration of his views in a series of lectures at Halle had already been undertaken and popularised by a former student and now colleague, Georg Friedrich Meier, in a style of German 'embellished with many felicitous turns of phrase' and, it would seem, far removed from the scholastic austerity of Baumgarten's Latin.[5] While Meier's text may have served the interests of its German readers it has had little impact on anglophone scholarship, remaining, like the *Aesthetica*, untranslated into English.

Third, a case can be made that Baumgarten's credentials appear more substantial than they actually are. Far from 'inventing' aesthetics, it might be claimed, Baumgarten did little more than apply a classical Greek term to an already existing field of study, the critique of 'taste'. It's also been suggested that what Baumgarten understands by aesthetics relates only peripherally to artistic judgement or taste and is concerned much more with the role of sensation in the cognitive processes.

Fourth and finally, there is the enormous influence of Kant's revolutionary metaphysics which was soon to supplant the rationalist tradition to which Baumgarten, via Leibniz and Christian Wolff, was a direct heir. Its implications for the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement were particularly far-reaching. No longer could excellence inhere absolutely in the art object itself; consensus as to the merits of a particular artwork had to be explained by other means. Kant's belief that in his third *Critique* he had solved this problem no doubt accounts for his ambivalent assessment of Baumgarten's philosophical standing. That he admired and respected Baumgarten's work is beyond dispute. It was, after all, Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* that formed the basis of many of his lectures. At the same time, he held certain reservations that are more than mere quibbles over particular details. Among his notes are several pertinent observations: he sees Baumgarten as 'sharp-sighted (in little things) but not far-sighted (in big ones)', and a 'good analyst, but not an architectonical philosopher'. With regard to the *Aesthetica* the title, he implies, is a misnomer: rather than 'aesthetic' the 'term "critique of the beautiful" would fit better'.[6]

Now to the actual text of the *Aesthetica*. I'll make just a few introductory remarks before proceeding to a close reading of specific details. No prior knowledge of Baumgarten's philosophy will be assumed. Rather than give an initial summary, though, I'll try to link whatever explanation of context might be needed to the analysis as it proceeds. In other words, what I'll be offering is a kind of guided tour of the first few sections, stopping along the way to consider particular points of interest.

Baumgarten published what he had completed of the *Aesthetica* in two volumes, the first in 1750, and the second in 1757. The project remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1762. Like Spinoza and Wolff before him, Baumgarten was an exponent of the *modus geometricus* or geometric method. As well as being organised hierarchically into parts, topics and sections the entire work is set out in sequentially numbered paragraphs. This system of numbering makes it easy for Baumgarten to refer, as he frequently does, to the content of earlier paragraphs, as well as to the similarly numbered passages of his other works such as the *Meditationes philosophicae* (*Reflections on Poetry*), the *Ethica* and the *Metaphysica.* The *Metaphysica*, I should point out, has recently been translated into English, along with the detailed marginal notes made by Kant in his copy of the text.

The intoductory chapter, the 'Prolegomena', begins with Baumgarten's often quoted definition of his newly named field of study:

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[5] Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Part I (Frankfurt-on-Oder: Johann Christian Kleyb, 1750), pp. 2-3. This and all subsequent translations from the *Aesthetica* are my own.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 210.

> [§1] Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, lower gnosiology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of an analogue of reason) is the science of sensible cognition.[7]

Several observations are called for here. First, the definition seems much clearer if we omit the parenthetical middle section: 'Aesthetics is the science of sensible cognition'. I'm not suggesting that this is the way the sentence should be read. It is, though, precisely the position taken by those who dismiss Baumgarten's aesthetics as merely an account of sensory processes. However one interprets the rest of the definition, it's quite evident that more than the mechanics of sensation is involved.

So what is the function of the parenthetical phrases? Syntactically, there's no ambiguity; each phrase is simply in apposition to the term 'aesthetics'. This, however, implies that what we have is a string of synonyms, that any of the terms might be substituted for any other without loss of meaning. But is, for example, the theory of the liberal arts identical to lower gnosiology, or the art of thinking beautifully to the science of sensible cognition? Surely it makes more sense to treat each of the parenthetical terms as an *aspect* of aesthetics, and to regard them as functioning *in aggregate*. That is to say, aesthetics is the science of sensible cognition as it applies to *all* the listed instances.

But there's a further difficulty with the definition. It draws on concepts that are assumed to be understood by the reader and no doubt were to Baumgarten's contemporaries. For the present-day reader, however, there are some gaps that need filling in. This will involve, as a first step, turning to the earlier *Reflections on Poetry*.

What, then, do we learn about sensible cognition, lower gnosiology, an analogue of reason and thinking beautifully from the *Reflections*? In some cases quite a lot, in others very little. I'll begin with a brief overview before attending to specifics.

Baumgarten's aim, as he notes in his preface, is to link two things which have hitherto been held to be 'entirely antithetical', philosophy and the 'knowledge of how to construct a poem'.[8] This antithesis receives no further explanation here, though it does reappear at the end of the *Reflections* as justification for the need of a new science of perception which is the be known as *aesthetics*. It is brought up again — and dismissed — in the *Aesthetica* as grounds for a possible objection to treating the theory of beauty as a science. The antithesis itself is the legacy of a tradition which extends back via Cartesian dualism to Plotinus's distinction between sense perception and noesis: poetry, with its dependence on sound, cadence and visual imagery, belongs to the realm of bodily sensation while philosophy with its interest in clear and distinct ideas deals only with the mind. A point to note here is that, with Baumgarten's stated focus, a limit has been imposed on the extent of the enquiry: its concern is not sensory cognition as such, but sensory cognition *as it applies to the making and appreciation of poetry*. The investigation is to be developed in several stages: (1) the 'notion' of the poem and its associated terminology, (2) the nature of 'poetic cognition', (3) elements common to the construction of all poems, and (4) the examination of 'poetic language' with some remarks about 'poetics in general'.[9]

If this outline does not entirely explain the terminology of the *Aesthetica* definition, it does at least provide a starting point for teasing out its implications. We might now usefully consider each of the parenthetical phrases.

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[7] I have followed Paul Guyer here in rendering *sensitivus* as 'sensible'. As Guyer notes, none of the possible options is entirely satisfactory, but given that 'sensible' is the 'standard rendition of *sinnlich* in translations of Kant', a term used earlier by Meier an an equivalent of Baumgarten's *sensitivus*, it seems the most suitable choice. See Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Vol. 1, *The Eighteenth Century*, p. 322, n. 32.

[8] Baumgarten, *Reflections*, p. 36.

[9] Baumgarten, *Reflections*, p. 36.

First, sensible cognition, and what is almost but not quite the same thing, lower gnosiology. As we have seen, it's not the existence of the higher and lower faculties that's at stake, nor is it their hierarchical function in relation to intellectual and sensible cognition. What changes with Baumgarten's substitution of 'gnosiology' for 'cognition' is the cognitive status of sensory perceptions; they are no longer simply inputs to be processed by the imagination but a form of knowledge in their own right. Admittedly, that knowledge may not be identical to intellectual understanding, but at the same time — and this is Baumgarten's crucial innovation — it is not its radical other. What it is and how it comes about is fully explicable by using logic and the resources of reason; thus it is a perfectly legitimate object of study for philosophy.

The nature of the relation between aesthetics and reason is indicated by the somewhat cumbersome phrase *ars analogi rationis*, the 'art of an analogue of reason'. While argument by analogy was discussed by Aristotle and used extensively by the scholastics, the concept of an analogue of reason seems to be entirely an invention of Baumgarten's. Note that we're not talking here of reasoning *by means of* analogy; if that's what Baumgarten meant he would have written something like *ars rationis analogicae*, 'the art of analogical reason'. No. What he means is that aesthetics itself is analogous to reason, that the processes involved in rational thought have their exact parallel in the study and practice of aesthetics.

This brings us finally to *ars pulcre cogitandi*, 'the art of thinking beautifully'. Again, there is something awkward about the expression: wouldn't it be better to write 'the art of beautiful thinking'? While there's nothing intrinsically wrong with this translation, and some commentators have in fact rendered the Latin this way, I would argue that it is misleading. The difficulty at a syntactic level is that the Latin gerund, unlike the English, cannot be qualified by an adjective. That is to say, it's not legitimate to write *pulcri cogitandi* for 'of beautiful thinking'; one can only use an adverbial construction. So, while in the absence of a Latin alternative both English renditions are technically justifiable, the more literal translation, I'd suggest, is closer to Baumgarten's meaning. 'Beautiful thinking' conveys the idea of thought, in other words a noetic process, that is notable for its elegance and precision. 'Thinking beautifully', on the other hand, refers to cognitive activity that takes place within the sphere of sensory perception. It's not thought in any strict philosophical sense, that is, it's not a function of rationality or reason, but to some extent *resembles* rational processes. This is more or less what Baumgarten means when he calls aesthetics an *analogue of reason*. I say 'more or less' because, when it comes to the relation between beauty and thought, the division between the higher and lower faculties is not as rigid as might from the foregoing be supposed.

Important as the notion of thinking beautifully is, it is not the only type of reference to beauty in the early part of the *Aesthetica*. A quick survey yields the following: what is 'spoken or written beautifully' (§5), things to be 'understood beautifully' (§8), the beauty and elegance of a 'complex of representations' (§17), beauty as a 'universal and general principle' (§17), the beauty of 'sensible cognition' (§§18, 19, 20, 22, 24), the beauty of 'objects' (18), the beauty of 'order' (§19), the beauty of 'signification' (§20), and finally, the 'rules' of beauty (§25). It's not necessary to establish the precise meaning of each of these terms to see that they fall into several categories or groups: those that refer to sensory perception, those that involve the intellect and those that in some way are the concern of both. A closer look at particular instances will help clarify the nature of this interrelation.

First, though, we might consider an example where what is emphasised is the *separation* of the faculties. Paragraphs 14, 15 and 16 read as follows:

> [§14] The purpose of aesthetics is the perfection of sensible cognition as such. This is its beauty, and what must be guarded against, as such, is its imperfection.

> [§15] The aesthetician as such is not concerned with perfections of sensible cognition that are so concealed that either they remain entirely obscure to us, or else we are unable to see them other than by the understanding.
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> [§16] The aesthetician as such is not concerned with perfections of sensible cognition that are so concealed that either they remain entirely obscure to us, or else cannot be discovered other than by intellectual judgement.

There are several remarks to be made here. First, while the opening statement echoes the definition of aesthetics in §1, there is an important difference: the focus is no longer on what aesthetics *is* but on what it *does*. Not only is it a domain of theoretical enquiry, it is also a *praxis*. Thus when Baumgarten refers to the genius, expertise or other characteristics of the 'aesthetician' he most often has in mind the practitioner of a particular art, generally, but not necessarily, poetry. Second, we now have a definition of beauty *as it relates to aesthetics*: it is the 'perfection of sensible cognition as such'. If this explanation is not all that helpful it's because an understanding of how sensible cognition might be perfected seems to be presupposed. And this, as it turns out, is precisely the case. While no explicit link to the *Reflections* is indicated, it is in the *Refections* that we find a detailed account of what constitutes the perfection of sensible cognition, at least as far as poetry is concerned. I'll expand on this shortly, but first there's one final observation to be made about the *Aesthetica* excerpt we're currently discussing.

In contrast to later references, the intellect in §§15 and 16 is represented as having nothing to do with the practice of aesthetics, insofar as that practice involves the perfection of sensible cognition. Interestingly, though, the perfection that pertains to aesthetics is not absolute; there is a *limit* to the degree of perfection attainable by means of sensible cognition alone. Beyond that limit there are perfections that are discoverable only by the exercise of 'intellectual judgement' and discernible only by the understanding. And while these concealed perfections may be of interest to the philosopher, they are, Baumgarten insists, of no concern to the practising aesthetician.

It remains to consider further just what the perfection of sensible cognition actually means, and also the nature and extent of its relation to the intellect. From what we've just seen there appears to be no relation, yet for Baumgarten it's not quite so straightforward. To expand on this, though, it will first be useful to return to the *Reflections*.

Following a short preface, Baumgarten begins the *Reflections* with a series of annotated definitions. Selecting the most relevant for our present purpose we have:

> **Discourse:** a series of words which designate connected representations.
> **Sensate representations:** representations received through the lower part of the cognitive faculty.
> **Perfect sensate discourse:** discourse whose various parts are directed toward the apprehension of sensate representations.
> **Poem:** perfect sensate discourse.
> **Poetic:** whatever can contribute to the perfection of the poem.[10]

The above is a somewhat truncated list, but it does enable us to see where Baumgarten's investigation is headed. While nothing is said at this stage about either beauty or aesthetics, a clear link is established between the notion of the poetic and the perfection of sensate discourse. The more poetic a discourse, the greater its perfection and hence, looking ahead to the *Aesthetica*, the

[10] Baumgarten, *Reflections*, pp. 3-40. When quoting from or referring to the *Reflections* I use Aschenbrenner and Holther's term 'sensate' for *sensitivus*.

greater its beauty. Of course, the *Aesthetica*'s stated concern is with the perfection of *sensible cognition* which, applying as it does to all the liberal arts, is a broader category than sensate discourse. But, following Baumgarten's example, we can resort synecdochically to poetry in order to gain some sense of what's at stake across the entire domain of aesthetics.

Writing further of poetic representations, Baumgarten notes that they are by definition clear, but at the same time confused. This apparent contradiction is due, if I may put it this way, to confusion about the meaning of 'confused'. For Baumgarten 'confused' is not the opposite of 'clear' but of 'distinct', distinctness being an attribute of conceptual certainty and therefore pertaining entirely to the intellect. A sensate representation, therefore, can never be distinct; poetic or otherwise, it is necessarily confused, and if lacking in poetic qualities may well be obscure. While all representations that qualify as poetic are clear, some will be clearer than others. The clarity of a representation is of two types, extensive and intensive. Of these it is the former that interests Baumgarten. A representation is said to be *extensively clearer* than another when more is represented. It is, in other words, *more fully determinate*.

Much of the *Reflections* is taken up with discussion of the particular kinds of representation that constitute the poetic: the greater a representation's clarity, the more poetic it is; conversely, the more obscure, the less poetic, and hence something to be avoided. A couple of examples will help illustrate how this measure of poetic intensity works. Because images are sensate representations, they are, therefore, poetic. But images are not as clear as 'sense impressions' which are determined by 'aroused affects', so it is more poetic to 'arouse affects' than simply to produce imagery. As for descriptions, the most poetic are those with 'many parts' that are 'confusedly represented', that is, through such means as the inclusion of sensory details and the use of metaphor. Descriptions that aim for definitional precision, however, are to that extent more distinct and thus less poetic.

From consideration of what is more or less poetic, it's not too great a leap to what constitutes the perfection of sensate cognition. Whatever particular art one has in mind, it becomes a question of the clarity and extent of sensate representations in relation to the distinctness of conceptual content: the greater the latter, the less perfect the former. Once again, sensation and intellect emerge as radically disjunct domains.

But as I indicated earlier, it's not that simple. Reason's hostility towards sensation is part of an inheritance that Baumgarten is seeking to refute. In the *Aesthetica*, §12, he cites as a potential objection to his project the following: 'The lower faculties, being in the body, need more to be fought than aroused and strengthened'. Beauty, such a critic appears to be saying, is a matter for the intellect alone and can only be corrupted by the intrusion of the senses. In reply, Baumgarten does not deny a role for the intellect, but insists that what the lower faculties require is 'direction' rather than 'tyranny'. At the same time it's not all one-sided: the higher faculties are as dependent on the input of the senses for their functioning as the lower are in need of guidance and direction.

Much of the early part of the *Aesthetica* is devoted to the kind of direction required for thinking beautifully. Here, too, Baumgarten is at pains to emphasise the interdependence of the faculties. Just as the aesthetic sensibility requires the guidance of the intellect if it is to perfect itself, the intellect in turn can only provide this guidance if appropriately informed by the lower faculties:

> [§41] The more important lower faculties, those that are such by nature, are necessary for thinking beautifully. Indeed, these are not only able to coexist with the higher faculties which are naturally important, but are also required by them *as an indispensible condition*.

The role played by nature here should not be overlooked. Both 'beauty of spirit' and the 'endowments of understanding and reason', Baumgarten goes on to say, 'come into being as gifts of nature'. It is thus absurd, he implies, to value one over the other.

What Baumgarten calls the ‘discipline’ of aesthetics is a regime of education that recognises the autonomy and beauty of the creative spirit alongside the necessary involvement of the intellect. He is dismissive of the debate, evidently current at the time, as to whether great art is the product of pure genius or systematic training. Certainly, he agrees, without a beautiful spirit, a gift that can only be bestowed by the Muses, labouring at an art is a futile activity. But genius without discipline and the right type of application is equally unproductive. One aspect of this training is the close study of classical models, another consists of daily writing exercises, both governed by ‘rules’ which if they are to be valid must conform to the ‘laws’ of aesthetics. This in itself is hardly remarkable. What makes Baumgarten’s educative schema truly innovative, however, is the reciprocal dynamic it establishes between sensation and reason. The ‘natural’ aesthetician, that is, one with an innate sense of beauty, will, at the same time as receiving direction from reason, reach out and seek that direction. Mutual antagonism thus gives way to complementarity.

I have only touched on the complex interplay of genius, innate sensibility, practice, rules and laws that constitutes, for Baumgarten, the making of the aesthetician. A much fuller investigation is needed before the details of this interrelation can be presented with any adequacy. But one thing is now a little clearer. Even if we were to agree with Beiser, that the *Aesthetica* is essentially the realisation of what had already been formulated in the *Reflections*, we would have to acknowledge the ambitious scale of that realisation. Not only that, but realisation in this instance involves much more than fleshing out the implicit content the earlier text. The *Reflections* deals largely with what the perfection of poetic sensibility is, not how it is to be attained. The *Aesthetica*, on the other hand, as is evident even from the first few sections, offers a detailed and novel account of *how* the aspiring aesthetician might master the art of thinking beautifully. That in itself is sufficient reason to keep translating.

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